



Advertiser file photo

Elmer Cravalho, state House speaker 25 years ago when this photo was taken, listens to a phone call from Washington, where Congress was voting to admit Hawaii into the Union. Looking on is Spark Matsunaga, then a territorial representative and now a U.S. senator.

## 'We've got it!'

### Cravalho remembers 25-year 'revolution'

By Jeanette Foster  
Special to The Advertiser

WAILUKU — "We had a special phone line set up with Delegate Jack Burns in Washington and I was in Honolulu in the state House.

"I could hear one-by-one the roll-call vote being taken and hear each response," remembered former state House Speaker Elmer Cravalho about Hawaii's statehood vote 25 years ago.

"When we hit the magic number, the 50 plus one, I remember Jack saying 'We've got it! We've got it!' The entire (state) House rose and sang the Star Spangled Banner and Hawaii Pono! and we prayed.

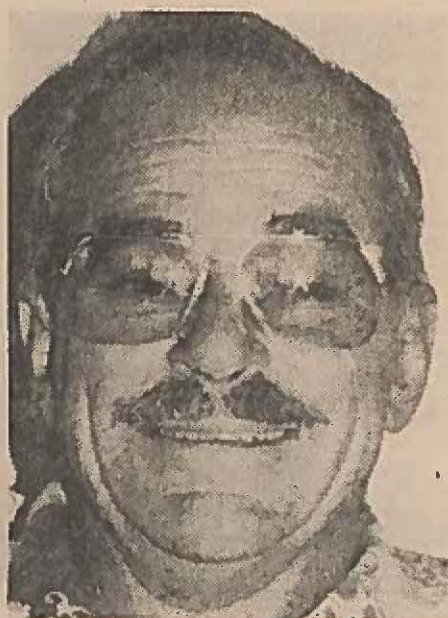
"It was my sense at that time, though it wasn't verbalized, that something of major importance has taken place," he said. "We couldn't pinpoint what the result would be, but we knew Hawaii would never be the same again. It was something deep down. We all felt it. It was like the breaking of an arbitrary barrier.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'At last — I'm equal.'"

Cravalho spent 25 years in public office as a member and Speaker of the state House and later as mayor of Maui County.

For Cravalho, part of the fight for statehood — a fight he fought for years at Burns' side — was a local battle against racism.

"To me a lot of opposition against statehood was racism, although it never came out in the open," Cravalho said. "Before '54 and even in '59 Hawaii was directed by large business entities, the so called Big



Elmer Cravalho  
"At last — I'm equal"

Five.

"You even heard comments like, 'We couldn't have a Japanese governor or someone of Japanese ancestry represent us in Washington.' Some people said that openly," Cravalho said. "I would compare the atmosphere to today where we have racial discrimination between what people term locals and newcomers."

Burns had a different approach to statehood, an approach which Cravalho called courageous.

"He said instead of being together with Alaska in a bill for statehood, where both the foes of Alaska and Hawaii join together and defeat the bill, let Alaska go first in a separate

bill," Cravalho said. "That took courage because he had to come home and run for re-election and justify that action."

When statehood finally came, it had a monumental affect on the islands, Cravalho believes.

"When we look at the depth and scope of change in Hawaii in the past 25 years it's a revolution greater than the revolution that came after the coming of Captain Cook and greater than the revolution that came after the Democrats became the official party of the state in 1954."

"It was a combination of legislation and statehood that people outside the state began to realize that this was no longer the land of the grass shacks, the hula-hula skirt dancers," Cravalho said. "It was no longer a foreign country."

"People were interested in spending money here," he said. "This allowed us to do a number of things. We could bargain now. We could tell industry, 'You want to build a hotel, good, where's the public beach, where's the employee housing, where's the land for low income housing.' All these things we never dreamed of asking before statehood. We brought the large corporations, dragging their heels, kicking, squeeling and screaming, into the 20th century. We made them realize their civic responsibilities."

The only dark side that Cravalho sees in Hawaii's history since statehood is that not enough time and energy has been spent on dealing with the frustrations and problems

of Hawaiians.

"The Hawaiians are aggrieved and with legitimate reasons," he said. "They've been ignored, neglected, moved, trampled on and thrown out. They see themselves small, not in terms of numbers, but in share of the pie. We need to deal with their problems and not this patronizing pat on the back and say 'Gee, you sure have a nice culture and we should work to preserve it.'"

"The same imagination and vision that brought about statehood is needed to address these kinds of needs raised by the Hawaiians," Cravalho said.

Cravalho is retired from politics and spends his time working his pig farm and running the Kula Community Credit Union. He's not as certain about Hawaii's next 25 years as he was about the last quarter century, especially on Maui.

"I'm not optimistic when I look at the planning process going on now," he said. "We cannot accept the philosophy that is prevalent on the Mainland — if things are overcrowded, move over to the next state. If resources run out — divert them to another state. We have God-made restrictions. We live on an island. We have to take control of our destiny and plan for the future."

"Many good things have happened since statehood," Cravalho said. "But the futures depends on the same kind of factors brought about statehood — strong aggressive leadership.

"If that is absent we cannot realize or achieve our full potential."